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Extended Abstract

An Uneasy Relationship: Open Educational Practice and Neoliberalism

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1. Introduction

This paper is based on very practical concerns and observations about the Open Educational Resource (OER) movement. While it concerns educational practice, the paper starts with a focus on the rhetoric and stated ideals of the OER movement, exploring the relationship between open education and neoliberalism as an attempt to understand the apparent contradictions within the movement. The paper then looks at OER in distance education as an attempt to understand our own approach to Open Educational Practice (OEP). Drawing on older open education narratives it explores the role of openness in bringing new voices into education through partnerships, and how OEP foster opportunities for groups of learners distanced from education. The paper concludes by acknowledging the deliberate partiality of this reading, and with some questions we are starting to explore.

2. Three Readings of Open Education and Neoliberalism

We can tease out two distinct discourses within OER, open education as spaces of resistance to neoliberalism and the marketisation of education, and more recently open education as co-opted [1] by neoliberalism. This section explores these and suggests a third, OER as a product of neoliberalism.

2.1 Spaces of Resistance

Discourses on OER emphasise its potential to undermine the commodification of education, for example challenging commercial publishers in the United States (US) and through textbooks. The OER movement arose from and draws many of its advocates from jurisdictions (like the US) where access to post compulsory education is costly and/or generally seen as a private good. Likewise the development of the OER movement in England has tracked increasing fees for Higher Education (HE)

and shifting political narratives, from education as a public good, to HE providers have become commercial enterprises, market orientated with paying customers [2]. The inference is the OER movement is a potential space of resistance. However, this potential is unrealised, with content generally created and consumed by the educational haves [3]. There is a great deal of ennui in the movement about the socio-economic profile of consumers, but little insight into the source of these contradictions.

2.2 The Co-option of Openness

Perhaps these contradictions arose because the liberal ideals of the open education movement have been co-opted. Weller's argument that the OER movement is in danger of losing itself as big business looks to co-opt the language of open is possibly best illustrated by the heat and light surrounding the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) movement, where commercial and political interests motivated by the large numbers seems to push aside OER ideals. Certainly capital has crashed in, MOOC discourses tend to be dominated by echoes of Schumpeter's "Creative Destruction"[4], and the oft repeated the "Avalanche is Coming" [5]. However, is this any different from the language employed by OER advocates, which also echo Schumpeter. Instead, let's look at the co-option of the word open, even here the case is not clear. Open is part and parcel of neoliberalism, and not just open innovation that is part of the creative destruction [6], but the broader sense of what open is and does in the world. Opening up markets is the first part of the economic shock tactics of neoliberalism [7].

2.3 Open Education and Neoliberalism

The early optimism of open education movements often focused on autonomous self directed learners, on creating independent learners who could pick and choose from a wide range of educational materials constructing their own curriculum. However, it is in no way clear how the connectivist pedagogy that underlines the early OER flowing into MOOC (cMOOC) developments are inclusive. The self created and endorsed by self regulated learning is very particular, and sits neatly with the autonomous individual of neoliberalism [8]. The idea of the learner as empowered and given agency through openness and the freedom to taking personal responsibility fails to account for this social psychology approach to learning works "in the world", in particular in relation to the politics of inequality [8]. The reality is the social and structural inequalities within our society are such that the ideal of the autonomous self directed learner is something that is largely the property of those who have already been through "the system". Creating an approach to openness that is built on these assumptions may end up reproducing those iniquities rather than challenging them.

3. Educational Practice in Open Education

It might seem unfair to suggest a reading of the OER movement with its focus on the individual and freedoms is akin to many other "counter culture" movements [9][10] and a product of capitals search for new market. However, the pedagogic challenge noted above suggests OER is deeply entwined with neoliberal forces in ways that simple stories about spaces of resistance or co-option do not account for. The purpose in highlighting inherent contradictions within OER is not to undermine the idea of open and free education, but to surface questions over its form and function.

3.1 Distance Education to Online Education

There is a sense that we tend to make openness in our own image(s) [11]. Online education is a key influence on the OER movement [12], in the UK the OER movement has developed from the online education movement and the sharing of learning objects amongst learning technologists, it tends to focus on widening access (massification) not widening participation (WP, the socio-economic base of those accessing education). Setting aside the clear parallels with the recent growth of Higher Education under neoliberalism, which has tended to focus on widening access and the skills for economic participation, neglecting WP [13]. While in distance education the creation and distribution of standardised content, was later added to by the recognition that without support those distanced from education would still be excluded [14]. When online education and then OER cleaved from Distance Education, it drew on the creation and sharing of content, it even drew on the sense of reaching learners. However, it seems to have neglected a fundamental tenant, the ideas around supporting uncertain learners.

3.2 Emerging Approaches to OEP

Our own work draws on the tradition of equity and inclusion from distance learning in part because we arrived in the OER movement by accident. Over the years the OU in Scotland has developed a particular approach to working in partnership with organisations who work with marginalised groups, these partners are “trusted sources” of support, “safe places” [15]. Our work with OER emerged out of those educational practices, we were less concerned with how to enable openness and far more concerned with what openness might enable. What it enabled was work outside the constraints of the formal curriculum, joining up inbetween spaces often crucial to educational transitions [15]. It also enabled us to open up content production, bringing new voices into OER. The approach was participatory co-designing learning journeys with partners educators and learners alike. For example, our work with social housing tenants was energy saving advice written for those in fuel poverty produced by those experiencing fuel poverty [16]. Likewise, recent work with young carers about transitions has been about working with caring charities and young carers to co-design learning journeys that were meaningful to them [3]. This, and other emerging work with Trade Unions and Third Sector organisations supporting those in poverty, has far more in common with older traditions of communities and groups working together to develop educational opportunities [17].

4. Conclusions

This paper is partly an attempt to explain the genealogy of our OEP, an attempt to attempt to understand our general uneasiness with the OER movement, and a wish to share some of the questions we have. We arrived at openness indirectly through educational practices concerned with opening up access to education more generally. In trying to understand why we have developed different approaches to OEP we have presented a deliberately partial reading of OER discourses. In exploring our uneasiness and its roots, what is obscured are the reasons these partners are seeking us out, and our own questions.

Partly we are sought because of trust and shared values [15], but also relates to cost effectiveness and efficiencies. Third sector organisations and their clients are often at the sharp end of austerity policies and retreat of the state. First through delivering services for the state as it retreats, then through supporting client groups experiencing austerity. Certainly we have lessons to learn, and it may be that we can learn from what is happening on the margins of neoliberalism as many of the patterns we now observe in “the North” like zero hour contracts and gated communities are innovations from the “Global South” [18]. While we see examples of OER and OEP that can be read as neocolonialist [7] [19]. We also see the emergence of approaches to openness which start to question the role of the academy in society, for example action research approaches to practical problems like agricultural productivity which break down the barriers between academics and society [20], where again it is about what openness enables. We sense a common purpose, but also common questions, we end by asking whether we are in danger of becoming complicit in the creation of the neoliberal state through propping it up, and if so, how to reshape the path of openness.

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